

# Nursing Homes Question State Accounts

BY MEG HECKMAN  
Concord Monitor

Nursing homes across New Hampshire say the Department of Health and Human Services owes them \$4.4 million for care provided to needy seniors.

Dozens of homes are challenging payments received under Medicaid, a government program that subsidizes poor residents' nursing home stays. The homes claim the state has underpaid them since 2002. State health officials disagree, pointing to increases in Medicaid payments over the last several years.

This is the latest in a series of prickly debates over caring for frail, indigent seniors. Medicaid's complex regulations and New Hampshire's frugal tendencies routinely put state leaders at odds with nursing homes. Lawmakers and Gov. John Lynch, meanwhile, say they're trying to sort out the department's accounting practices in hopes of reaching a solution.

Lynch "believes the state should be meeting its commitment to nursing homes

## *N.H. Homes Say They're Shortchanged Despite Department's Budget Surplus*

and taxpayers and not shortchanging them," said Pamela Walsh, a spokeswoman for the governor.

The complaint was filed last month with the department's internal appeals unit, which handles disputes between DHHS and health care providers. About 60 of the state's 78 nursing homes signed the appeal. A preliminary hearing is scheduled for early October.

Nursing homes say they're used to scrounging for Medicaid dollars. Reimbursements, they say, usually fall below the cost of providing care, and, when the state's budget is tight, rates are reduced further.

The homes grew suspicious this sum-

mer, after Health Commissioner John Stephen told lawmakers there was a surplus in the department's \$192 million nursing home budget. The homes investigated and decided to appeal.

The New Hampshire Health Care Association, which represents the state's nursing homes, estimates the shortfall at about \$2 per resident, per day. President John Poirier says this forces nursing homes to look else-

where for money: Private homes may increase fees for wealthier residents. Public homes, which are run by the counties, look to taxpayers.

"You can't tell the nursing home providers that you don't have enough money to pay them the full rate, while at

**"They're trying to suggest that if we don't spend every single penny, we somehow have not met our obligation."**

Doug McNutt, N.H. Bureau  
Of Elderly and Adult Services

the same time you're telling the legislature you have excess money in the account," Poirier said.

Doug McNutt, chief of the Bureau of Elderly and Adult Services, says any leftover money is the result of fewer nursing home residents. New Hampshire, he says, ranks 11th among states for the amount of money it spends per elderly Medicaid recipient.

"They're trying to suggest that if we don't spend every single penny, we somehow have not met our obligation," McNutt said. "That's not our opinion at all. Over the last several year, we've made a substantial impact in raising the rates."

Nursing home administrators say the only rate increase they've seen in recent years has been tied to residents with more complicated health conditions, whose expensive care swallows up the additional money.

Lawmakers charged with overseeing the state's finances are trying to make sense of the dispute. Rep. Fred King, chairman of the Fiscal Committee, says a thorough review of the health department's books may help reach a compromise.